

**Planting A Seed: Thirty Years of Middle East Regional Cooperation**  
**Rep. Henry A. Waxman**  
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Peace is negotiated between governments, but is realized between peoples.

True peace - real peace - meaningful peace - enduring peace - involves direct conciliation between peoples. Peace means making life normal between peoples.

When Ben Gurion delivered the Proclamation of Independence declaring the State of Israel, he said, and I quote, “We extend the hand of peace and good-neighborliness to all the States around us and to their people, and we call upon them to cooperate in mutual helpfulness with the independent Jewish nation in its Land. The State of Israel is prepared to make its contribution in a concerted effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.”

Thirty years later, these words resonated with me as Egypt and Israel initiated talks to recognize each other diplomatically through the Camp David Peace Accords. When Congress considered the legislation approving U.S. economic and military aid to Egypt and Israel to bolster the Peace Accords, I offered an amendment to create the Middle East Regional Cooperation program – which is more commonly known by its acronym “MERC” - to encourage Israeli and Egyptian scientists and researchers to collaborate on projects of mutual concern.

My amendment did not come out of nowhere. Israeli scientists and scholars discussed with me an opportunity they saw to join in collaborative research and scientific projects with their Arab and Palestinian colleagues. A direct opportunity was presented by the strategic and political events that were unfolding. There would be good science and good conscience that these partnerships would further advance the prospects for peace between Israel and her neighbors.

My hope, therefore, was that this cooperative work would help develop professional relationships and friendships that could enhance peace and understanding regardless of political developments. Considering that environmental challenges in the Middle East have exacerbated the Arab-Israeli conflict, I envisioned a program that would allow Arabs and Israelis to work side-by-side and solve problems jointly as partners and not as rivals.

MERC started very modestly, with a budget of only about \$50,000. Today the budget is \$5 million.

Today, another thirty years later, the MERC program continues to thrive, receiving more high quality grant applications than it is able to accept. It was Theodore Herzl who famously said, “If you will it, it is no dream.” That is how I think of MERC.

While a lasting comprehensive peace remains elusive, MERC’s mission to promote coexistence continues in earnest. This University, in the spirit and vision of Ben Gurion, has been a leader in the MERC program and a driving force behind its success.

From the large desert agriculture projects the University first launched with Egypt with the help of MERC in the 1980s and 1990s, Ben Gurion students and scientists have quite literally sown the seeds of peace.

The campus here in Sde (S'DAY) Boker and the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research are internationally known for cutting edge research on crop management in desert climates, and water desalinization, conservation and reclamation. The work being done here is helping discover methods to harvest desert sun and wind as renewable energy sources. The campus is also a key participant in Israel's MASHAV program, which provides all kinds of development training for countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East.

The energy of this campus fuels Israel's pride as a light unto the nations.

Just to give a few recent examples of the University's successful involvement in MERC projects:

- Ben Gurion scientists recently worked with Jordanian colleagues to identify and remediate sources of naturally occurring radioactivity in a major Jordanian aquifer. Jordanian authorities were able to act before the aquifer was tapped for public use.
- A joint project between scientists from Ben Gurion and researchers in Gaza is now underway to measure the extent of lead poisoning in children, identify sources of exposure, and work to correct them.
- And, on an issue close to my heart, Ben Gurion scientists have been working with Palestinian colleagues on a MERC grant to design and test a smoking cessation program among high-risk youth in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

I understand that some of these Israeli and Palestinian researchers are here in the audience today.

On behalf of the United States, the MERC program, and all who hope for a future of peace – Let me say thank you.

Thank you for recognizing that Israelis and Palestinians can achieve more from coexistence than from conflict.

Thank you for your scholarship. Thank you for your determination to continue your work even in challenging and sometimes dangerous circumstances.

One of the reasons for MERC's success is that the program deliberately focused on the academic arena to reduce any government involvement that could inject political issues. I believe it is a testament to the program's success that so many of the scientists who worked together under the auspices of the MERC program have continued to sustain personal and professional relationships throughout the ups and downs of the Arab-Israeli conflict and maintain friendships long after the completion of their projects.

I take heart in hearing stories of MERC researchers in Israel and Lebanon emailing to check on each other's safety during the height of the recent war with Hezbollah. But I was saddened when I heard that Hamas' rockets from Gaza forced a shutdown of this University's classes.

I find hope for the future when Israeli researchers participating in a MERC grant with Jordanian colleagues can sit at a table with Saudis to discuss the region's vulnerability to earthquakes - of the natural kind.

It is proof to me that MERC continues to be a much-needed forum to demonstrate the promise of closer ties for Israelis and Arabs across the region. I continue to believe that those in the academic arena are in a unique position to set aside political and ideological views to find practical common ground.

MERC crystallizes a compelling belief held by Israelis that there are willing partners in the Arab world who share their interest in a productive future. There is a sound basis for peace and more importantly a basis for something beyond a cold peace. There can be fruitful cooperation and collaboration and enterprise.

Even as MERC's value is demonstrated to Israelis, I remain deeply troubled that Arab researchers are often stigmatized or ostracized by their university colleagues for participating in research with Israel.

It is a tragic trend that has proliferated beyond the Arab world as academic boycotts against Israeli universities. This is now fashionable in many parts of Europe. It is part of a concerted effort to isolate and ostracize Israel and Israelis. An academic boycott is the worst form of censorship. It is a blatant assault on academic freedom and in the case of Israel it belies the diverse environment and robust exchange of ideas at Israeli universities.

These boycotts are the agenda of those who actually have no interest in peace; those who would rather see a "one-state" solution that obliterates Israel than a "two-state" solution that embraces a future for Jews and Palestinians to live side by side in peace and security.

I live and hope and work for a time when Middle East Regional Cooperation is not exceptional, or unique, or a small sliver of hope in a cruel geopolitical landscape. I will continue working for a time when the MERC program is the norm – not the exception.

So I do want to turn briefly to a discussion of where we stand right now on the issues of peace and war, and what our medium-term prospects might be.

I have to say, they are not good. Recently, King Abdullah of Jordan was in Washington and met with Members of Congress. His message was stark, and suffused with pessimism.

He said, in effect, that we may be on the brink of another war, fomented by Iran, with Hezbollah rockets and Syrian supplied Scuds poised to cascade into Israel. The Ahmadinejad regime wants nothing more than to divert attention from Iran's nuclear advances and present a conflagration

intended to derail everything – from negotiations with the Palestinians to any concerted action against Iran.

I think his warning rendered a real service, in terms of redoubling attention to flashpoints of danger.

His warning came of course during a period of some strain in the relationship between Washington and Jerusalem. For whatever reason, small issues have become big issues, and the big issues are not being addressed.

I think we need to focus on the big issues, and apply all of our energy and assets to executing resolution of those big issues. And they are principally two:

First, there must a two-state solution: Israel and Palestine to live side by side in peace. And there has to be equal pressure on Palestinians to come to the table and discuss peace directly with Israel.

And for my President, I believe he has to resist advice that the United States should develop – and then seek to impose – its best ideas of what peace looks like.

Peace can come only through direct negotiation among the parties. Peace plans from Washington are not the answer. Peace plans from Jerusalem and Ramallah are the answer.

Indirect talks will begin shortly. After years of direct talks, I had hoped for more. But if this is the best that can be done right now, then they should proceed by all means.

Second, Iran must not have a nuclear weapon – now or ever. We will shortly finalize, in Congress, an aggressive package of sanctions against Iran. I hope we take these to the limit, and cripple the country's financial institutions and gasoline imports. The UN Security Council is also preparing to consider new multilateral sanctions against Iran. I give President Obama a great deal of credit for his strategic efforts to engage Russia and China to make this possible. In addition, I believe we must do everything possible to encourage democracy and freedom in Iran, so that the Iranian people can truly secure their destiny.

At the same time, I must say that I do not believe that there is at this time a military option.

And here is why:

I know who wins Day One of a military strike. There is no doubt that Iran's nuclear facilities can be severely disrupted, and many destroyed.

But tell me: who wins Day Two, when thousands of rockets come down on Israel, when Syria becomes active militarily again, when Jordan is pushed to the brink, when the streets of Egypt erupt, when the Taliban redoubles its efforts in Afghanistan, when the Shi'ites in Iraq and Al Qaida in Iraq attempt to provoke civil war, when Pakistan faces destabilization, and when Iran closes the Straits of Hormuz and oil goes to \$200 a barrel?

Now, I do not know if all these things will happen. But they certainly can happen beginning on Day Two. Unfortunately, I have not seen any comprehensive strategic preparations to prevent the worst outcomes from occurring.

So for every armchair general who wants to strike Iran, I say: tell me what will prevent calamity beginning on Day Two?

A military strike may buy some time from Iran's developing a weapon. It may be required at the end of the road of applying pressure on Iran, externally and internally, when there comes a moment when it is clear that the objective of preventing Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon has failed.

But that time is not now.

I also want to say something about President Obama to my friends in Israel.

I am a strong supporter of the President. Just 13 months ago, Barack Obama became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. He campaigned on hope and renewal of the American spirit and our political process.

There was a sense that with vigorous leadership, we could confront the profound challenges we faced. I believe his election was a unique moment for our country to affirm its values once again and get America moving again -- and moving in the right direction.

And we are doing so. The economic recovery, thanks to the President's policies, is underway. Things are not getting better fast enough yet for enough people, but the economy is growing, and jobs will come.

We have enacted into law the most profound social policy reform since the 1930s -- health insurance reform. We are ending the insurance industry's most punitive practices. And we are providing access to quality, affordable health insurance for all Americans, including 32 million who are without health insurance today.

We are advancing sweeping education reform.

We are on the verge of enacting the most comprehensive reform of Wall Street since the Depression.

This record alone makes the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress the most productive since Franklin Roosevelt's first term in office.

On foreign policy, the President is leading the rebuilding of America's image and standing in the world.

But I daresay one of the few countries where his popularity has gone down is here in Israel.

I am saddened by it.

I don't believe the harsh attitudes towards President Obama by many in Israel are warranted.

I know, from my own discussions with President Obama, that he believes fervently in Israel, in Israel's mission, in Israel's right to exist, in Israel's future and in Israel's absolute security.

Those who believe otherwise may be entitled to their views. They are not entitled to lie, which I see so often in the viral emails that attack the President. Those who want to vilify the President are mistaken in my judgment.

We can quarrel about the Administration's tactics to bring the parties to negotiations, but not about the President's objectives, which are shared by this government and those before it: a two-state solution; a safe Israel with secure borders and with its eternal capitol in Jerusalem

As supporters of Israel, all of us have more to gain from engaging President Obama and his administration on the policy goals we share. We have to get the policy right, and the diplomacy right. Our cornering the President is not the answer – just like the President's cornering Israel is not the answer. We have to be smarter and effective way to secure our objectives.

Israel may be the only country where issues of war and peace are so immediate, so symbiotically linked, and so interchangeable.

I very much wanted to come here to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this esteemed university, to pay homage to Ben Gurion and Israel's founders and to reaffirm what I believed three decades ago, when I started the Middle East Regional Cooperation Program:

We can reach for the best of human nature. Values of humanity can span borders and bridge divides.

Who knows, in an arid land, there is nothing like a little drip irrigation to make a garden grow, and sustain a family for generations.